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THE
HOLY COMMUNION.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT ST. JOHN'S, BILTON, HARROGATE,

ON THE

25th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, 1871,

BY THE

REV. JOHN SHEEPSHANKS, M.A.,

Vicar.

Published by Request.

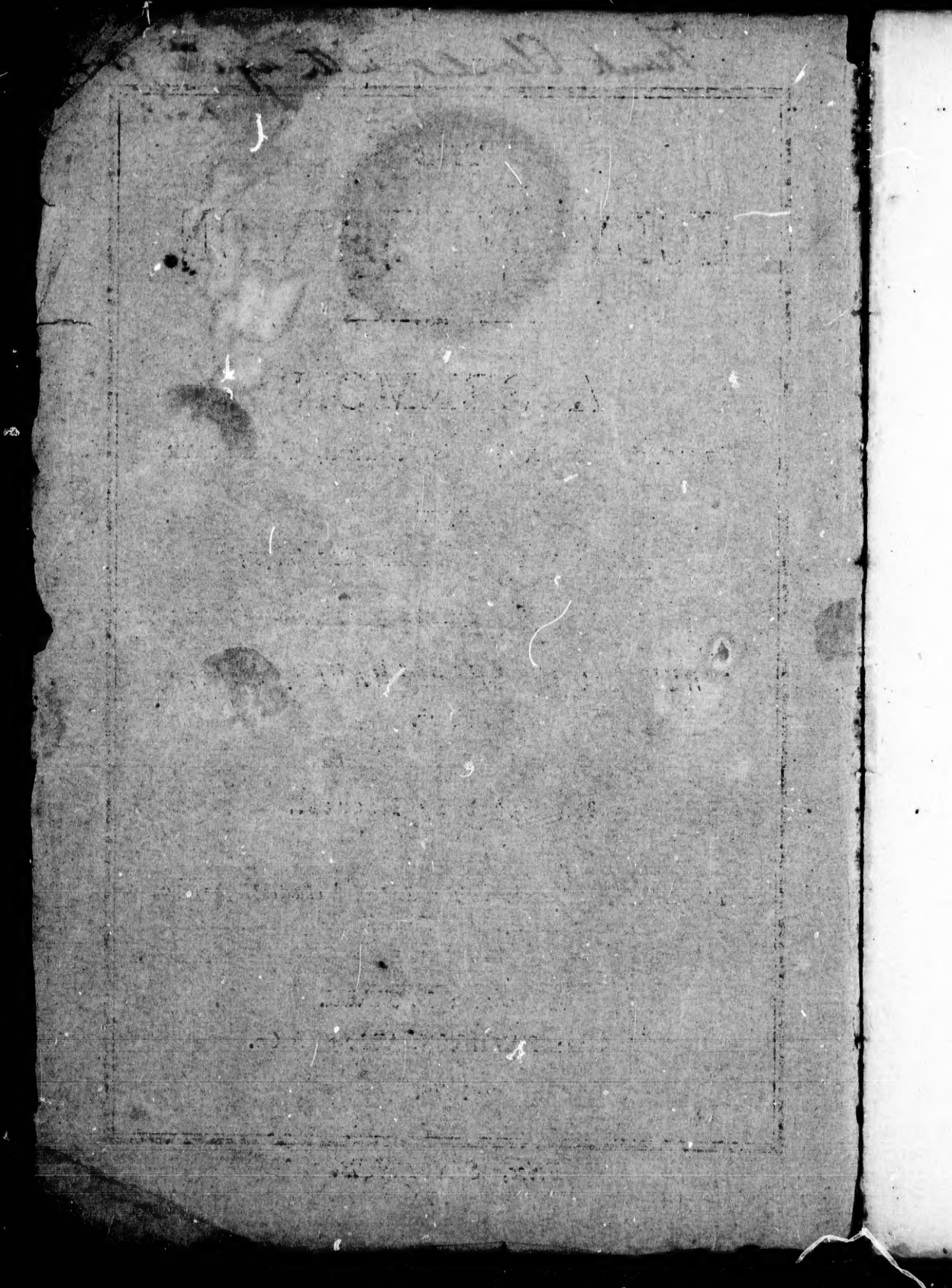
The proceeds of this Sermon will be devoted to charitable purposes.

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I. CORINTHIANS x. 16.

"THE CUP OF BLESSING THAT WE BLESS, IS IT NOT THE COMMUNION OF THE BLOOD OF CHRIST? THE BREAD WHICH WE BREAK, IS IT NOT THE COMMUNION OF THE BODY OF CHRIST?"

THE approach of Christmas Day, one of the three great Festivals of the Church, on which all Christian people should partake of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, has moved me, as your Pastor, to speak to you this Evening of that holy ordinance.

Let me ask from you the earnest attention which the subject demands, and let us all pray God that what is said may be for His glory, and for the edification of souls which Jesus at His Advent came to redeem.

(I) A few words, and but a few, upon the *doctrine* of this holy mystery.

The Holy Communion may, as I have before observed to you, be regarded under two aspects, (i) as a memorial or, as it is sometimes called, a commemorative sacrifice, and (ii) as a sacrament or channel of divine grace to our souls.

As regards the former, the learned and judicious Dr. Waterland says, "The Sacrament of the Eucharist has more particularly obtained the name of a *Sacrifice*, partly on account of the *offerings* then given to the Church and poor, (alms and thanksgiving being frequently styled spiritual sacrifices in the Bible,) and partly on account of the commemorated sacrifice. For though baptism commemorates the *death* and *burial* and indirectly the grand sacrifice, (of Christ,) yet it does not so precisely, formally, and directly represent or commemorate the *Sacrifice* of the *Cross* as the Eucharist does."

This aspect of the Sacrament is set before us in the words of our Lord, "This do in remembrance of Me," and in those of S. Paul, "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew *the Lord's death*, 'till He come,"

And it is in accordance with these words that in our Communion Office we say that "Christ did institute and in His holy Gospel command us to continue a perpetual *memory* (i.e. memorial representation) of that, His precious death, until His coming again."

When in the celebration we break the bread and pour out the wine as a representation of His Sacred Body bruised and broken, and His precious Blood shed upon the Cross, we make a memorial of His all-sufficient Sacrifice; we ourselves look back through the vista of eighteen centuries to the awful scene displayed on Calvary, and by faith see the bleeding Lamb crucified for us; and looking up to our merciful Father, we plead with Him the merits of His dear Son's Cross and passion (while our great High Priest ever presents the same on high)

and by that tremendous Sacrifice we beseech our heavenly Father to apply savingly to our souls all the benefits of the same blessed atoning work.*

But (II) The Holy Communion is also the channel by or through which a divine gift is conveyed to our souls. What is required on our parts that we may beneficially receive this Sacrament? Faith. What is the channel through which a divine gift is conveyed to our souls? The elements of bread and wine, when hallowed by the prayer of him to whom Christ has committed the power. What is the divine gift by this means conveyed to the faithful? The Body and Blood of Christ; as our Master teaches us, when giving the consecrated Bread to His disciples He said, "take eat, this is my Body."

You will remember how well and truly this is put by the Church Catechism. A Sacrament has two parts, the outward and visible sign, and the inward and spiritual grace (or gift). What is the *outward part* (or sign) of the Lord's Supper? Bread and Wine which the Lord hath commanded to be received.

* "In the Eucharist as a Sacrament we receive spiritually 'the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for us,' 'the Blood which was shed for us:' In the same Eucharist as a Sacrifice, we in representation plead the one great Sacrifice which our great High Priest continually presenteth for us in heaven. In heaven He presenteth ever before the Father, in person, Himself-mediating with the Father as our Intercessor; on earth He invisibly sanctifies what is offered, and makes the earthly elements, which we offer, to be sacramentally and ineffably—but not in a carnal way—His Body and Blood. For, although once for all offered, that Sacrifice, be it remembered, is ever *living and continuous*, made to be continuous by the resurrection of our Lord. Rev. v. 6, 12." (Bishop Phillpotts Pastoral Letter, 1851.)

What is the *inward part* (or thing signified)? The Body and Blood of Christ which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper. What then are the results to the faithful? What benefits do they get from this divine gift? The strengthening and refreshing of our souls by the Body and Blood of Christ, as our bodies (are strengthened) by the Bread and Wine. This doctrine is quite plain. We in partaking of the consecrated bread and wine, which, still remaining bread and wine, nourish our bodies, do if we have true faith, partake in a spiritual, real,* heavenly manner of the Body and Blood of Christ for the nourishment of our souls.

And so it is, that in the very prayer of consecration, the priest is made to say, "Grant that we, receiving these Thy creatures of bread and wine, according to our Saviour Christ's holy institution, may be partakers of His most blessed Body and Blood."

This is the doctrine of the Church of England. I need scarcely say to Churchmen that it is the doctrine of the Church, because it is the doctrine of the Bible. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat My Flesh and drink My

The word 'real' in this connection is opposed not to 'spiritual', but to 'carnal.' The protestant sometimes says (erroneously) "The Romanist believes in a real presence in the Eucharist, we believe in a spiritual presence," which implies that a spiritual presence is unreal or fictitious. The Churchman on the other hand says, 'we do not hold a carnal presence, which because it would "profit nothing," would be unreal, but a presence which is heavenly and spiritual and therefore most real.' So our best divines. See Bp. Jer. Taylor 'Real Presence and Spiritual' § 1, 2.

Blood, ye have no life in you." "Take, eat, this is My Body." Such are the words of our Lord and Master. While the inspired Apostle Paul sets forth the doctrine in the words of my text, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not the communion (*i.e.*, the partaking in common) of the Blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not the communion of the Body of Christ?"

But are there any who are disposed to ask, like Nicodemus, "How can these things be?" How can the bread and wine, simple elements, become to our souls, when consecrated by prayer, the Body and Blood of Christ? This question our Church utterly refuses to answer. The Bible does not answer it. Some sects have, as you are aware, attempted to define the mode of Christ's presence, and have been led either into utterly unwarranted dogmatizing, or into the emptying the Sacrament of all reality. The Church of Rome, for example, has invented the theory of transubstantiation, which teaches that in the Eucharist the substance of the elements is changed, so that though they look and taste like bread and wine, yet the senses are deceived, for bread and wine they are in substance no longer; from whence follows the shocking corollary that they are to be adored. This theory our Church condemns as novel and most perilous,* as she does also the op-

* It might be asked, "Why does the Church of England repudiate so strongly the dogma of transubstantiation, when, after all, it is only a *theory*?" The reasons are given in our 28th Article.

(i.) Transubstantiation cannot be proved by the Bible, and to indulge in unwarranted theories concerning heavenly mysteries is always presump-

posite false notions which deprive the Sacrament of all reality, and reduce it to little more than a religious form. She holds firmly the *fact* of our Lord's presence in the Eucharist, but refuses altogether to define the *mode*. The homily concerning the Sacrament, which, remember, is an authoritative document (according to Art. xxxv.), speaks thus:—"We need not think that such exact knowledge is required by every man, that he be able to discuss all high points in the doctrine thereof; but thus much we must be sure to hold, that in the Supper of the Lord there is no vain ceremony, no bare sign, no *untrue figure of a thing absent*." The refusal of our Church to theorize upon this high mystery is well expressed in the old lines of one of our Reformers:—

tuous and perilous. The Church knows nothing from reason or revelation of "substance" as apart from "accidents."

(ii.) It is repugnant of the plain words of holy Scripture.

(iii.) It overthroweth the notion of a Sacrament. Our Church, following S. Augustine, defines a Sacrament as having two parts, the outward visible sign and the inward spiritual grace (or gift). The Roman theory, which asserts that at consecration the substance of the outward part departs we know not where, "overthrows the nature of a Sacrament." The theory of many modern Religionists does the same; for they in fact deny that there is any real inward gift at all.

(iv.) It has inevitably been the cause of many superstitions. If that which is on the paten or in the chalice be no longer bread or wine, being transubstantiated, It naturally will be adored, (Conc. Trid. sess. xiii. cap. 8, can. 6) carried in processions, and "lifted up" to be worshipped. It was the *practical results* of the theory of transubstantiation which fired the Reformers with such zeal against it.

It was the Lord that spake it,
 He took the bread and brake it,
 And what His Word did make it,
 So I believe and take it.*

So much for the *doctrine* ; but, Christian brethren, I wish this evening to give a practical direction to your thoughts. Consider how good and kind and loving a thing it is of our dear Saviour, to leave this precious gift as a legacy of love behind Him. He seems (i) to desire to promote unity and love between the brethren that He leaves behind Him upon earth, and He institutes this sweet and most expressive ordinance as an ordinance of love. There is a social character about the holy rite, which is pre-eminently calculated to foster a loving spirit amongst those who partake of it. It recognizes, and sets forth in a striking way our equality before God. There may be distinctions between us, and grades of society in *things of the world* ; there must be. There always have been, and there always will be. But in the most important things of all, the only things that in reality are of importance,

* Those who may wish to see the doctrine of the Church of England more fully explained are referred to the following learned divines :—Bp. Ridley (Disp. at Oxford), Bp. Overall, Bp. Andrews (Sermons and Resp. ad Bell.), Archbp : Laud, Bp. Cosin (Hist. of Transub.), Dean Jackson, Dr. Sutton, Archbp : Bramhall (Answer to M. de la Mill), Hammond (Cat.), Bp. Jer. Taylor (Real Presence, Life of Christ, &c.), Bp. Ken, Bp. Beveridge (Frequent Com :), Dr. Thorndike, Bp. Sparrow, Dean Brevint, Dean Comber, Sherlock (Practical Christian), Bp. Wilson, Bp. Phillpotts (Charge, 1851), Bp. Hamilton (Charge), Keble (Euch. Adoration), Bishop of Salisbury (Bampton Lectures), &c., &c.

the things of religion, the things that concern the world of eternity, we are all equal. We are all equal in the sight of God our Father. Redemption is offered to us all equally through Jesus Christ, and this equality, always recognised by the Church, is more especially shewn by Christ's institution in the Lord's Supper. It is the one banquet of which all may partake upon a footing of perfect equality. Sovereigns and subjects partake of it side by side, and both know, and all know, that they both have an equal right to it. For once, at all events, it is undeniable that the beggar is worth as much as the Emperor; nay, if he have a more devout heart, he is worth more, and thus for once and in a most lively manner the brotherhood of mankind is preached, and false notions of haughtiness and pride and superiority are dashed to the ground.

“We being many are one bread and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread;” so says S. Paul. Oh, how this should promote love and charity amongst us! It does do so to some extent. Persons who have a quarrel will not, in many cases, until the quarrel is made up, kneel together before God's board, in this testifying to the fact that the feast is a feast of love and charity; but we ought to go much further than this, we ought to feel drawn in love and sympathy towards all those with whom we kneel, side by side; we then partake in common not only of the same loaf, of the same juice of the grape, but if we go with faithful hearts, we all partake after a heavenly and most real manner of the Bread of Life, Christ our Lord; as S. Paul says in my text “The Bread

that we break is it not the Communion (or common partaking) of the Body of Christ?" and oh! how that sacred Body coming to our souls should be the bond of love and union between us all!

But brethren, the question cannot but stare us in the face, how is it that, while in this land at least all or nearly all profess to be Christians, so few join in this solemn rite which the Founder of Christianity has appointed for all His followers? It is necessary to point out to you that the Lord's Supper is the only act of *Christian worship* prescribed in the Bible. Our morning prayer, our evening prayer, our litany, our other acts of Christian worship are good, all good and pious and edifying, they have been framed by the Church, according to the power committed to her, upon Scriptural principles; but, I repeat, the Lord's Supper is the only act of social Christian worship for which a command is given and a form ordered in the New Testament. Our Master Himself celebrated this ordinance, and then, having done it, He said to His Apostles, the representatives of His Church, "do this." And the Church from that time did it. It was the usual mode of worship of the believers in the first days—as we gather from the Acts of the Apostles: we read "on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together,"—not to hear a sermon, not even to say matins, but—"to break bread."* It was the Christian worship on the Lord's Day, the breaking of bread, and so S. Paul in my text

* Acts, xx. 7. See Acts, ii. 42, 46. xxvii. 35. I. Cor., x. 16. I. Cor., xi. 20, 21, 22—34.

speaks of it incidentally as their ordinary custom. "The Bread that we break," *i.e.* that we are in the habit of breaking, is it not the Communion of the Body of Christ? and so in many other places.

So that we find *the Bible worship* of the Christians is the Lord's Supper. Yet this, the Bible worship, is by the vast majority of professing Christians never attended!

Then again, our Lord evidently intended *all His followers* to partake of it, not merely a select few. He does not say when He gives the chalice, "drink of this, those that are the most righteous, or that think yourselves the most righteous," but "drink ye all of this." He instituted it for His followers, as their social act of worship and as the chief means whereby they should maintain their union with Him, their Lord; we may certainly say from His words, that for men to claim to be His followers and yet *not* to "do that in remembrance of Him" was never within His intention. "Do this," He says; *i.e.*, if you believe in Me, if you love me, "do this in remembrance of me."

And multitudes, multitudes, who would be most indignant if they were not looked upon as believers in Christ never have 'done this,' and have no immediate intention of doing it.

Do men realize the proffered blessing? Partly perhaps, but not fully. Do men know that Christ, *the Son of God*, comes to the faithful in this Sacrament and takes up His abode in them? they are His own words, quoted in our Communion Office, "He that eateth My Flesh, and drinketh My Blood

dwelleth in Me and I in him,"* and Christ thus dwelling spiritually in us is the principle of everlasting life; and so it is that the Priest says in the Office, "The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life."

And see what inestimable blessings Christ brings in His train. (i) There is forgiveness of sins. Yes, brethren, you ought to know that they who go with heartfelt repentance and true faith to the Holy Communion obtain full forgiveness, an entire absolution for their sins. This is evident from the express words of our Saviour Christ in the institution, "Drink ye all of this, for this is My Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." My Blood shed for the remission of sins, this is It. As Waterland asks, "Why such a stress laid upon drinking this Blood shed for remission, if they were not to drink remission in the very act?" And indeed the same is quite evident from general considerations, for it is beyond question that in the Communion the faithful partake of all the benefits of Christ's death; and as Waterland again says, "If we are partakers of Christ's death with the fruits thereof, and if the atonement be one of those fruits, and indeed the first and principal; and if remission follows the atonement, wherever it

* S. John, vi. 56, quoted in the exhortation in our Communion Office. "If with a true penitent heart and lively faith we receive that holy Sacrament, then we spiritually eat the Flesh of Christ and drink His Blood; then we dwell in Christ and Christ in us; we are one with Christ and Christ with us"—one proof that the Church of England interprets the 6th Ch. of S. John of the Holy Communion.

is truly applied, it is manifest, from these considerations taken together, that remission is conferred in the Sacrament of the Eucharist." And so it is that we pray in our Communion Office, "that our sinful bodies may be made clean by His Body, and our souls washed through His most precious Blood."*

Thus full forgiveness of sins is one of the blessings offered to us in this Sacrament.

Another is the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit. For inasmuch as the faithful partake of Christ, they must, upon Scripture principles, partake of the Spirit of Christ, who cannot be severed from Him.

Thus in the Eucharist Christ brings with Him the two blessings that we need, the two blessings that we are ever seeking from God,—pardon for the past, and grace for the future. Oh! the marvellous love of God for poor sinners! Oh! the mercy of Jesus towards struggling, feeble, fainting souls! Why, then, such being the mighty blessings, the most comforting supports given to us in this holy Sacrament, why is it treated with such general neglect? Ye men of the world, ye men of business, immersed in cares and active work, and surrounded by temptations, why do you neglect to use this means of strength against temptation, provided by God

* And so in the Homily "of Common Prayer and Sacraments" it is said, "Sacraments are visible signs, expressly commanded in the New Testament, whereunto is annexed the promise of *free forgiveness of our sins*, and of our holiness and joining in Christ."

Himself? Surely you need all the grace you can have! Ye toilers, ye poor, ye who earn your bread by the sweat of your brow, ye have many trials, and many sorrows. Your path is beset with temptations, and wants, and griefs. Here you can find both strength and consolation. To this feast of love Jesus Himself invites you, saying, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And yet but few accept his gracious invitation, and the mass pay no heed. Why is this? There are several reasons, with some of them I can deal, with others I cannot.

One reason of this wide-spread neglect is to be traced to the false spiritualism to be found in much of the popular religion of the day. The one-sided, and therefore wholly mistaken Puritan spirit is fond of saying, "Oh! it is not Sacraments that will save us, but belief in Christ." And this wretched perversion actually deceives many. Why, my friends, we all know that we must believe in Jesus Christ, or we cannot be saved; but what is it to believe in Him? Surely, to believe in Him includes this, that we believe His words; and He has said, "Take, eat, this is my Body: Do this in remembrance of Me;" and again, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the Flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you." Our Saviour, I suppose it will be granted, *means* these words when He says them. If we believe them, we shall act up to them; if we do not believe them, how can we claim to be saved by our belief in Christ! People, who ought to know better, sometimes speak as if there were an *antagonism* between preaching

Christ and preaching the Sacraments. This folly was well rebuked by one of the most learned and amiable of our prelates (Bishop of Lincoln) a short time since, who well pointed out that there *cannot* be any antagonism between the two. The Church in preaching Christ, preaches Christ in and through the Sacraments. In exalting the Sacraments, we exalt Christ, for they derive and can derive their value and efficacy only from Him. Christ Himself is the spiritual reality conveyed through the Sacraments; without Him the outward signs would be, and could be, only "weak and beggarly elements." What is required in us is faith in Christ, so that the one sole object and tendency of the Sacraments is to exalt Christ, by whom they were ordained and positively commanded. But I will not spend any more time in fighting a shadow.

The real reasons, which keep men and women back from this most blessed means of grace, I know to be commonly very different. Usually they are *personal* reasons. If I were to say to you all "you know that in the intention of Christ, you ought to come regularly and as a matter of course to the Lord's Supper; why do you not?" I know that I should get certain answers. One would say "I am not fit:" another would say "people ought to be very good before they partake of the Communion:" another "I am afraid, lest, after I have partaken, I should commit some sin;" another "plenty of people partake of it and then go away and commit some sin:" another says simply "It is a very solemn thing." I shall not attempt now to answer all these replies in detail (though if any

of you will apply to me, I will gladly endeavour to remove your difficulties). But I will, by way of conclusion, put forward a few considerations which will answer the chief objections. The first is this. What does God require of us that we may receive this blessed Sacrament to our souls health? Some seem to think that it is a sort of religious luxury for very good people. Nay! if any of us think that we are very good that only shews our utter unfitness. Those of us who partake regularly, do so, not because we are good, alas! we know better, but because we know that we are not good and desire to be better. If we were all that we ought to be, we should not want it; it is a *help*, and we should not need helps. No! The Sacrament is for poor sinners, who know that they are sinners, and want pardon and peace; what God requires is a sincere and contrite heart, true repentance for sins, a lively faith in Jesus our Lord. God forbid that I should hold out the slightest inducement to any persons to communicate, except they are in earnest in seeking salvation. But, if they are earnestly seeking salvation, let them come, and they will obtain just what they need. To partake unworthily is to partake from wrong motives. But the humble, the penitent, the broken-hearted, they who feel their sinfulness and believe in Jesus and His love should come thankfully. To stay away is to deprive themselves of their greatest help; to partake is to obey the invitation of Jesus, and is the surest means of strengthening them on their onward course.

Another point I would lay before you is this. It seems to be thought that to partake of the Lord's Supper is a risk,

whereas to stay away is safe. But no ! brethren, can it be safe to reject the command and loving invitation of Christ ? when He says " do this " can it be safe to refuse ? No, no, it cannot : shall we then make the plea that others partake, and still sin ? What is that to us ? Nay ! if others do a right thing in a wrong spirit that should never deter us from doing it, it should shew us that we should do it in a right spirit. They who habitually neglect the command of Christ upon this subject, live in disobedience to Him, and act as though they cared not for Him, for while He says " do this," they in fact say, " we will not do it."

Wherefore come all to the invitation of your Master. Ye that are penitent come, ye that are athirst, ye that long for holiness, ye that seek salvation, come, come all of you. Come not if you still love sin and will not put it away. But I trust it is not so : if still, to your grief, you are encumbered with sins and sinful habits, repent and pray and turn in spirit to your heavenly Father, and so come. Do not defer until you are all that you ought to be, for if you do this you will wait for ever. Do not think that this blessed gift is as a luxury for the spiritually rich. No ! it is a medicine for the sick, a help to poor penitent fainting struggling sinners. Come then in penitence, come in faith. Come not *once*, not now and then, not spasmodically, at rare intervals. Oh ! it is a sad grief to see those who once sought the Lord regularly in this holy ordinance falling off gradually and getting weary in well-doing. They perhaps think that they do not *feel* the benefit that they expected, and so mistrust the Lord, and cease to struggle.

Nay! but do not so. Come "just as you are, without one plea." Come with faith. Come with love, come in humility, and penitence, come zealously, come perseveringly. Come to Him who saith "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." Turning your back upon the world, come. Shutting your eyes to the seductions of the senses, come. Stopping your ears to the whispers of the devil, come. Setting yourself resolutely towards the celestial city, your heavenly home, come and throw yourself into the Everlasting Arms, and clinging close to the loving Heart of Jesus, He will give you rest.

